Learner Support Services in Open and Distance Learning : Issues and Evidences from the State of Assam

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Distance education in its organized form, is one of the path breaking innovations in the field of education of the Twentieth century. The period between "1960-1985" has witnessed remarkable growth of distance education all around the world (The International Scene -1, 2001). In our country as well, correspondence education started in as early as 1960s. However, with the establishment of the B.R. Ambedkar State Open University in 1982 and the IGNOU in 1985, distance education has emerged as a distinct educational system. In fact, governments in all around the world and in the developing countries in particular today have accepted ODL (Open and Distance Learning) as a legitimate means of meeting educational goals. For example, Government of India (GOI) in its Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007) aimed for wide expansion of the ODL institutions with an aim to enroll 40% of all tertiary students in such institutions by 2007. The governments of Namibia and Ghana declared their national policy to be of dual mode instruction. Similarly, national open universities have been established in other South-Asian countries viz. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Thailand, and Bangladesh to meet respective national policy objectives (Raza, 2008).

2. NEED OF THE STUDY:

This paper is at attempt to trace the evolution of distance education in the state of Assam. It also tries to evaluate the effectiveness of LSS adopted by these providers of distance education in the state. The prime focus has been laid on Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University and Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), Guwahati. This has been done keeping in view the geographical belongingness as well as their overall contribution towards the spread of ODL in the state.

3. **METHODOLOGY:**

The present study utilizes both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected from the Feedback Forms of learners of KKHSOU. It is worth mentioning here that the Centre for Internal Quality Assurance (CIQA) of KKHSOU has collected feedback from its learners to evaluate its Learner Support Services. While more than 3,500 Feedback forms have been received, the present study has utilized 200 randomly drawn feedback forms from the lot. Secondary data have been utilized from two major studies. Dutta, A.R. et al. (2009) conducted a study among 807 learners of KKHSOU from 12 districts of Assam, which sought to evaluate the overall access and performance mapping of the University. The second study referred to is the study conducted by Sarmah, B. and K. Das (2008). This study was conducted among the past learners of IDOL, Gauhati Univesity. In that study, data were collected from 50 learners and it aimed at gaining some feedbacks with regard to its LSSs.

We begin with the growth of distance education in the state of Assam in the recent years. In this section, we shall look into the figures of enrolments of the different the Open Univesities and the ODL Institutes in the state. In the fifth section, we shall focus our discussion on the aspects of LSS. This section begins with a brief theoretical discussion on LSSs, and then highlights some of the issues and evidences of LSSs with reference to the Guwahati Regional Centre, IGNOU. The prime focus has however been put on discussing the issues of LSSs especially drawn from the feedback of the learners of KKHSOU and IDOL, Gauhati University. The paper has been finally summed up in section sixth.

4. **GROWTH OF ODL IN ASSAM:**

While distance education started in India way back in the 1967, it started in the Northeastern states of Indian in 1988, when IGNOU established its first North East Regional Centre at Shillong, Meghalaya. Initially, it looked after the educational needs of the entire region. Later, in 1996, the Regional Centre of IGNOU was established in

Guwahati to look after the education needs of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim more attentively. By the year 2001, IGNOU had established one Regional Centre in each of the North-eastern states of India. Now, apart from IGNOU, the state of Assam has two Directorates of Distance Education in two state universities, viz., Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University and one State Open University (Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University).

4.1 Enrolment of IGNOU: Guwahati Regional Centre: The cumulative enrolments of the Regional Centre of Guwahati, IGNOU has been shown in the following figure 1.

Figure 1: Cumulative Enrolment of IGNOU: Guwahati Regional Centre
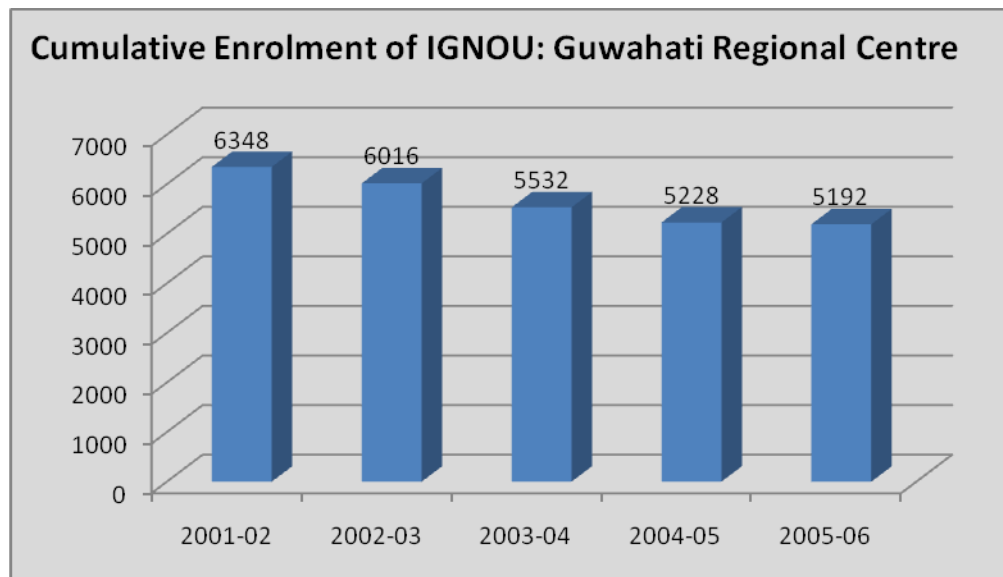

The above Figure 1 shows the growth of enrolments of the Guwahati Regional Centre of IGNOU. These figures however represent cumulative enrolments (both the new and the old students getting enrolments into subsequent semesters/years of all the programmes under its jurisdiction in the particular years). At present, the Guwahti Regional Centre of IGNOU is offering around 100 Academic Programmes at the Certificate, Diploma and Degree levels. There are around 50 Study Centres spread across various districts of Assam. In recent years, IGNOU has taken special drives in formulating short-term Skill based programmes with a view to equip the youth of the states with necessary skills, who

have not been able to pursue higher studies due to many socio-economic factors. Most of these Programmes are given free of cost to the learner and these are completely financed by the Educational Development for North East Region Unit (EDNERU), IGNOU

The following figure 2 shows new enrolments of the Guwahati Regional Centre of IGNOU into its various academic programmes. It shows steady increase in enrolments of students.

Figure 2: NewEnrolment of IGNOU in Recent Years: Guwahati Regional Centre

Enrolment of IGNOU in Recent Years: Guwahati Regional Centre
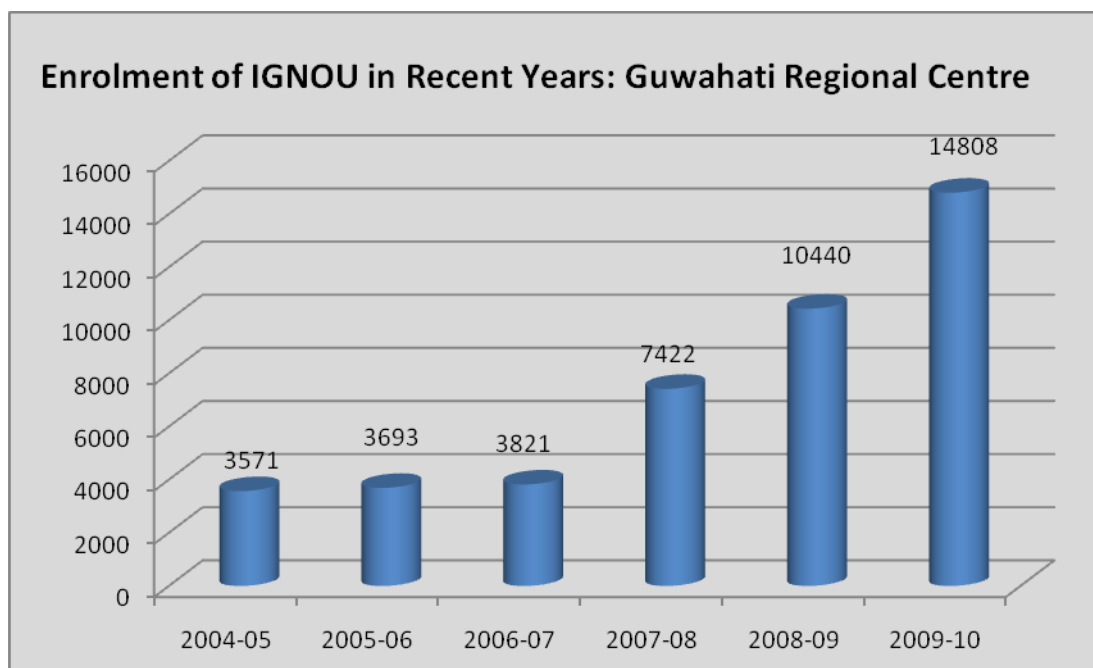
4.2 Enrolment of IDOL, Gauhati University:

The Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University was established in the year 1998-99. It was then known as Post Graduate Correspondence School (PGCS). Initially, it started with the Correspondence mode of education. By the year 2002, it transformed into an ODL institute by establishing study centres across the state. At present, it has 11 study centres and 91 contact centres across the state. Counselling classes are held at the study centres. At present it offers 12 Post Graduate Degree Programmes, 8 PG Diploma programmes and 1 Certificate programme. Examinations are held in 15 centres across the state. The following figure 3 and 4 show new and

cumulative enrolments, respectively of IDOL in the recent years into all of its Academic Programmes.

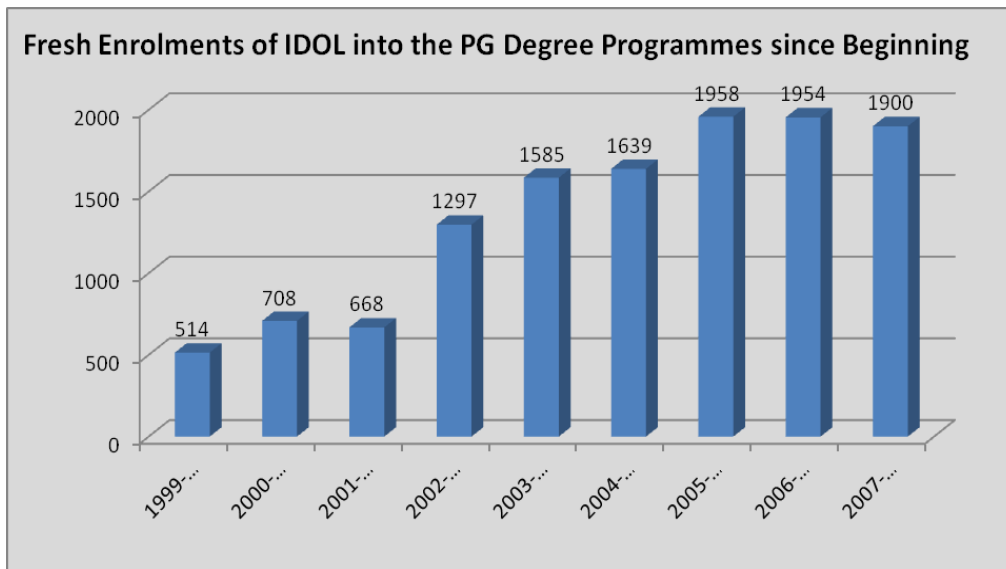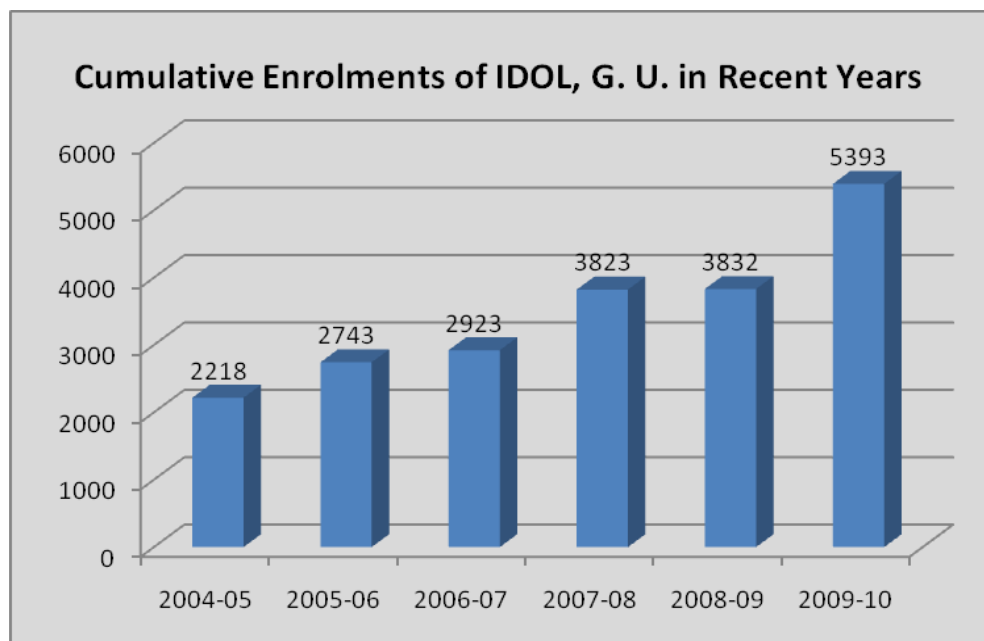**Figure 3: New Enrolment of IDOL, Gauhati University in Recent Years**

Figure 4: Cumulative Enrolment of IDOL, Gauhati University in Recent Years


4.3 Enrolment of KKHSOU, Guwahati:

Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) was established in the year 2005. The University started its activities in December, 2006 and launched its first

Academic Programme (Bachelor Preparatory Programme – BPP) in January, 2008. At present (till January, 2010), the University is offering Ph.D Programme, 3 Master's Degree Programme, 4 PG Diploma Programmes, 5 Bachelor's Degree Programmes (BA, BBA, B Com, BCA and BMC), 6 Diploma Programmes, 3 BPP programmes (BPP Arts, BPP Commerce and BPP Computer Science) and 11 Certificate Programmes. At present the University has 218 study centres across 27 districts of Assam, including 3 Jail study centres. The enrolments of learners into the Under-graduate programmes of this University in the last two years (2008-09 and 2009-10) have been shown in the following Figure 5.

Figure 5: New Enrolments of KKHSOU into the Under-graduate Programmes
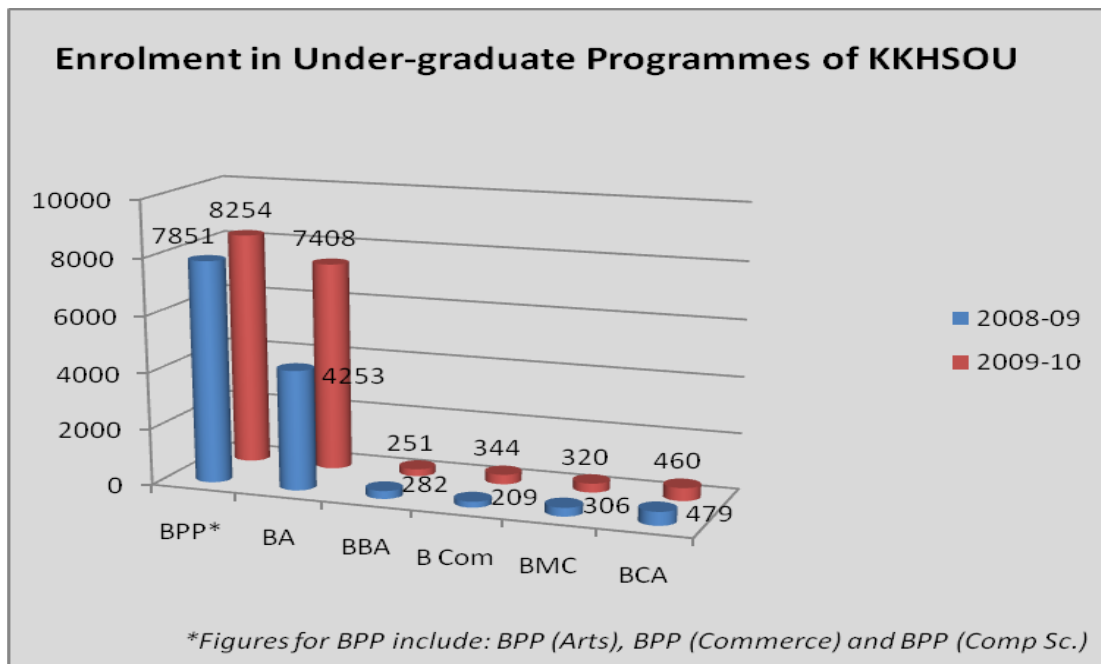
From the figure it can be easily seen that the spread of ODL has received a major boost, especially after the establishment of this University in the state of Assam. In its first two years, the total new enrolment into all the above under-graduate programmes has reached nearly 30,000. It is expected that if enrolments for the year 2010 (January and July), are added to this total, the figure of cumulative enrolments in the first three years would reach near the 50,000 mark.

5. LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES:

By the term Learner support services (LSSs), we mean any other services provided to the learners other than the SLMs. Thus, complementary services like: personal contact programmes, counseling, organisation of resource centres, library facilities, telephone teaching, interactive teaching through TV and Radio, and other similar activities form the components of LSS (Chander, 1998; Venkaiah, 1998). In general, the objectives of LSS are: *first,* to provide all information learners need; *second,* to encourage students to fully utilise the available facilities; *third,* to motivate learners to assimilate what they learn; *fourth,* to provide necessary counselling; and *fifth,* to create a friendly environment among students, the faculty and the administration (Chander, 1998).

Conceptually, in the distance education system, it is generally argued that frequent faculty-learner contact is desirable on the assumption that such experiences contribute to the growth and development of the learners (Shivanna, in K. T, 2001 *in* K. Murali Manohar, 2001). Learners get the chance to clear their doubts in such counseling sessions. Studies have shown that counseling sessions, which include presentation in interactive audio-visual media, are more interactive and effective. There is no doubt that an ODL institute/ university should take utmost attention for attaining higher degree of effectiveness of the counseling sessions. Similarly, other components of LSS like, library services and others also facilitate the art of self leaning among the distance learners.

We have already mentioned in the above that with respect to LSSs, we shall primarily focus on the evidences of IDOL, Gauhati University and KKHSOU. Before discussing these cases in detail, let us quickly glance at some of issues and evidences related to IGNOU with regard to its LSSs as is offered to its learners of its Guwahati Regional Centre.

5.1 LSSs of IGNOU: Issues and Evidences from the Guwahati Regional Centre

- Tele-conferencing, Interactive Radio Counselling, Audio-Video CD's, EDUSAT are the various modes available under Guwahati Regional Centre.
- Only 4 Study Centres are equipped with EDUSAT equipment.

- Regional Centre located far away from EDUSAT building.
- Use of technology in SSS has not made much headway due to non-availability of trained personnel to utilize the system.

The above facts have been gathered from the presentation slides of the Guwahati Regional Centre at the Regional Directors' Meet of the 8 states of the North-East, held on 13th November 2006, at Shillong. Let us consider some of the recent statistics.

- Study Centres equipped with EDUSAT equipment has been increased to 7.
- The number of Examination Centres at present is 21.
- So far, it has 18 Study Centres and 7 Special Study Centres in Assam and 25 Programme Study Centres (Programme Study Centres are meant for programmes with practical component i.e., programmes that require laboratory experiments.)

In general, at an IGNOU study under the Regional Centre, Guwahati, the following facilities are extended to the learners:

- Subject-specific academic counseling by part-time academic counselors.
- Audio and visual viewing facilities.
- Library facilities.
- Participation in Teleconferencing, and
- Information services related to rules, regulations, proceedings, schedules, etc. of the University.

5.2 LSSs of KKHSOU: Issues and Evidences

The model of LSSs of KKHSOU:

Apart from the SLMs, the University has undertaken the following measures to enhance its LSS:

- Subject-specific academic counseling by academic counselors at the Study Centres.
- Practical lab classes for the practical oriented courses.

- Library facilities. KKHSOU has supplied books and store wells to form libraries at the Study Centres at selected study centres, based on enrolments.

- Computers have been provided to study centres having enrolments into the programmes relating to computer sciences.

- Phone-in-programmes are telecast on through All India Radio on every fourth Sunday of the month at 11.30 am. In this programme, the Vice Chancellor of the University and/or other Senior Officials solves the queries of the learners from various parts of the state.

- A free SMS service has been launched. Students can enroll into this service and receive important updates.

- The University has already set up a sophisticated Recording Studio for the development of Audio-Visual materials.

- Trial-run of the FM Station of the University has already been done. It is going to be operational within weeks. Lots of Audio-Visual materials have been already been prepared to telecast through the FM Channel.

- Selected study centres are to be equipped with LCD Television, FM Radios along with DVDs to enable them to run the Audio-Visual materials developed by the University.

Evidences from Earlier Studies:

We have already mentioned that Dutta, Dr. A.R. et al. (2009) conducted a study among 807 learners of KKHSOU from 12 districts of Assam, which sought to evaluate the overall access and performance mapping of the University. Let us consider some of the important findings of this study.

Satisfaction over courses: The study tried to rank the satisfaction of the learners of KKHSOU over the courses of their enrolments.

- The study derived the conclusion that within all age groups above 90% has reported to have got the courses of one's own choice. The highest percentage, however, belongs to the age group above 35 years.

Mapping performance of KKHSOU: For mapping the performance of KKHSOU, the study raised different types of questions to its learners. The study initially tried to draw a general perception of their happiness over getting admission into the course as well as over the courses that they had opted for. Let us consider the level of satisfaction over the course opted by them. This aspect contained four scaling: very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad and very bad. The study found that:

- More than 73 percent students ranked the courses to be very good. More than 25 percent students ranked the courses as somewhat good. Only .5 percent students ranked the courses as somewhat bad and very bad, while 1 percent students did not mark any response.

The study tried to cross-examine such high level of ranking by analyzing their responses with reference to the four basic components of ODL, raised in the context of KKHSOU. The four components included in the study are:

- The Self Learning Materials,
- Classes at the Study Centres,
- Fee Structures, and
- Performance in the Examination.

With regard to the SLMs, the study received the following feedback:

- A total of 65% reported the reading materials to be very good and another 31.5% have said it to be somewhat good. Very insignificant portion have said these materials either to be bad or very bad.
- Again, the learners were asked to rank the study materials on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 for worst and 10 for best. The study found that more than 19 percent students gave the score of 10. Another 65% percent students gave scores between 7 and 9. More than 15% students gave ranks between 4 and 6. No students gave rank below 4.

With regard to classes conducted at the study centres, following conclusions were received:

- As high as 78.4% of the students considered the study centres to be 'very good'. 19.7% considered them to be 'somewhat good'. Nearly 85.6 percent had reported that they were regular in the classes.

- Again, 67.2 percent have reported the classes at the study centres to be very good and additional 17.8 percent have called it to be 'some what good' taking the toll to 85.0 percent

- As high as 81.4 percent have reported the teachers at the study centres to be very good. Additional 16.2 percent have described the teachers at the study centres as 'somewhat good'.

- 90 percent of the students interviewed perceive the classes at the study centres to be useful.

With regard to the fee structure of the University, the study recorded the following observations:

- 53.8% of the students who were interviewed have described the fee structure at KKHSOU to be reasonable. 32.6% have called it to be 'somewhat high'.

- Only 5.3 percent feel that it is very high. For 5.5 percent it is somewhat low and for 3.2 percent it is too low with remaining 5.2 percent giving on opinion on it.

- However, only 30.4% have compared the fee structure of KKHSOU with other institutions. Out of those who have compared 58.4 percent of them consider the fee structure to be reasonable 24.9% call it to be somewhat high.

With regard to the performance of its learners in the examinations, the study came up with the following observations:

- Out of 807 learners interviewed, only 23.9 percent of them had appeared in the examination.

- Of those who appeared in the examination, around 80 percent of these students had suggested that the reading materials were helpful towards preparing and appearing in the examination.

- In terms of results in the examination, the study recorded that out of 166 students who had reported their performance in the examination, only 1 student had failed and 2 students had dropped. 22 students had secured more than 70 percent, 42 students had secured in between 60 to 69 percent, 19 students could score in between 55 and 59 percent and 24 students had scored between 45 to 54 percent.

- 115 students have reported that they were happy with their result.

Evidences from the Present Primary Study:

As we have already stated, **t**he present study utilizes primary data from the Feedback Forms of learners of KKHSOU. While more than 3,500 Feedback forms have been received, the present study has utilized 200 randomly drawn feedback forms from the lot. The analysis of these 200 sample feedback forms are as follows:

- Out of 200 samples, 91 percent students found the counseling classes useful. Seven percent students responded in the negative, while 2 percent of the students did not mark any response.

- 84 percent students found the counseling sessions to be interesting and attractive. Nearly 14 percent students did not find them to be interesting and attractive, while 2 percent students remained silent on the issue.

- Students were also asked to rank their levels of satisfaction on the quality of counseling sessions. The scales included were: Very Good, Good, Average and Poor. The overall rating of the counseling sessions have been shown with the help of the following figure 6:

Figure 6: Overall rating of the Counselling sessions
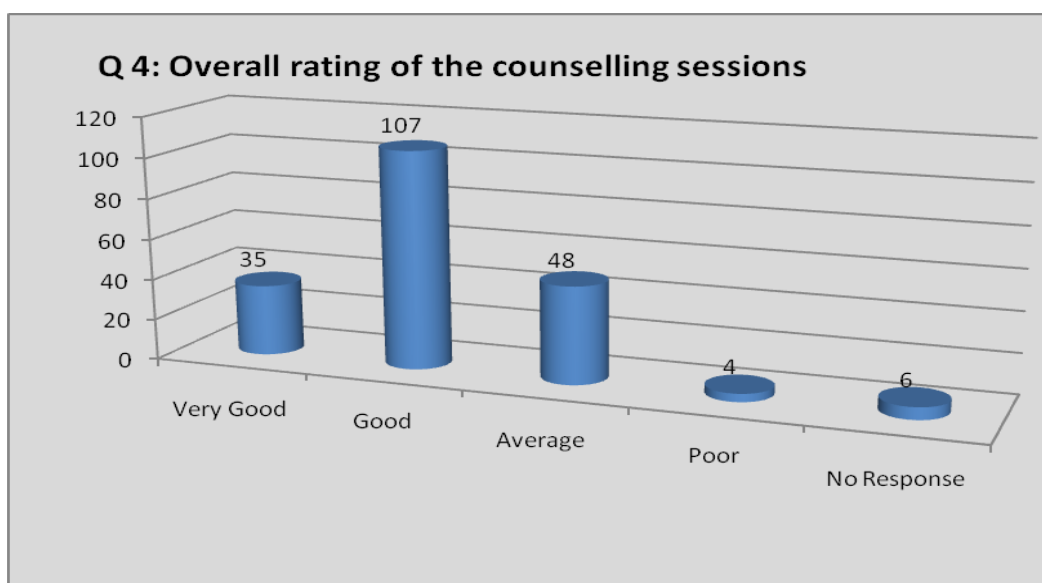
- Learners were asked whether the study centres allowed the learners to avail their existing library facilities. The responses received are quite interesting. Only 34.5 percent students responded that there were allowed access to the library at the study centres, while 61 percent responded in the negative and nearly 5 percent did not respond any. Such findings seem to be contradictory to the arrangements of the University with its Study Centres. According to the arrangements, the Study Centre should allow the learners of KKHSOU to utilise their library facilities. Study Centres should allow the learners of KKHSOU to consult the books of their libraries, though lending of the same is not mandatory.

- The learners were also asked to respond to the question whether they would recommend their family members, friends to opt for programmes in KKHSOU. Nearly 74 percent students responded yes. Another 8 percent students responded that probably, they will recommend a course to others. Only 1 student responded in the negative, while 20 percent students did not mark any respond to it.

Streamlining the Findings of the two Studies:

The above two separate studies conform that KKHSOU has emerged as a major provider of ODL in the State, and the University has a bright future in the days to come. The

second primary study to many extent re-validate the findings of the first study. However, the University has to better provide its LSSs to sustain its growth in the long run.

5.3 LSSs of IDOL, Gauhati University: Issues and Evidences

The model of LSSs of IDOL, Gauhati University is as follows: Apart from the SLMs, IDOL has undertaken the following measures to enhance its LSS:

- Subject-specific academic counseling by academic counselors at the Study Centres.

- IDOL has set up a library in its Gauhati University campus to fulfill the needs of its learners.

- Computer lab has been set up to facilitate practical classes for the learners enrolled into the programmes relating to computer sciences.

- A free SMS service has been launched. Students can enroll into this service and receive important updates.

- IDOL has developed its own web-site wherefrom its learners can download assignments.

- Apart from this website, IDOL has also launched the first e-learning portal of this region http://www.bodhidroom.idolgu.org/. Through this e-learning portal, learners can consult the faculties of IDOL while staying at a remote location. This web-site also allows for having group discussion among the net users / students. Students can download selected study materials from this e-learning portal. Launched in the year 2008-09, the portal at present has more than 1,300 active users.

Performance Mapping of LSSs of IDOL:

Evidences from Earlier studies

We have already mentioned that Sarmah, B and K. Das (2008) conducted a study among the past learners of IDOL, Gauhati Univesity. In that study, data were collected from 50 learners and it aimed at gaining some feedbacks with regard to its LSSs. Some of the major findings of this study were as follows:

- **Satisfaction of the Learners with regard to its various components of LSSs:** The learners were asked to rate their levels of satisfaction on a number of parameters with regard to the programmes offered by the IDOL, Gauhati University. These parameters included: Delivery of SLMs in Time, Quality of SLMs, In-depth coverage of the topics in the SLMs, Quality of Contact Classes held at study centres, Library facilities, Personal correspondences, Personal Guidance, Feedback received to the personal queries and Declaration of results. Ranks were given from extremely satisfied (with +5 points) to not at all satisfied (+1). The responses were calculated in terms of mean scores. The feedback based on mean scores were as follows:

Figure 10: Overall rating of the Various Components of LSS
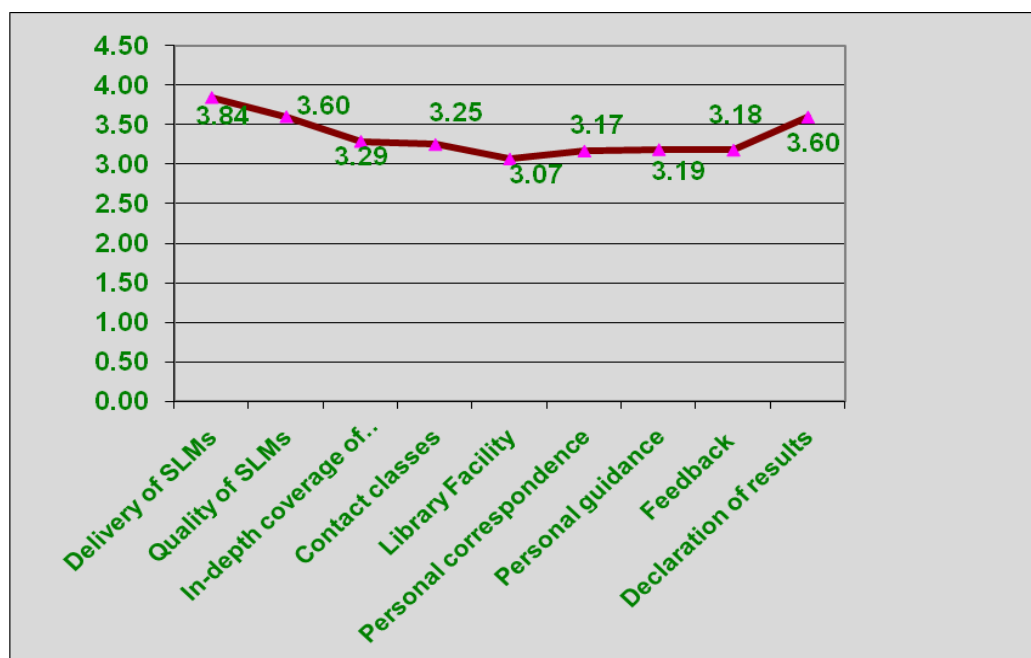
- Learners were also asked the questions like: a) whether they thought if PG Degree/Diploma courses should be offered in language other than English, b) Whether the student will take admission into other courses of IDOL, G.U. if need so arises in future, c) whether they consider IDOL to be successful on overall on its purpose, d) whether the learner was satisfied himself or herself on his/her performance in the examinations and e) whether they would recommend a programme of IDOL to other friends / relatives?

The responses received from them were measured in terms of percentage (based on agree /disagree to the questions). The results received has been shown in the following figure 11.

Figure 11: Figure 9: Recommendation of KKHSOU Programmes to Others
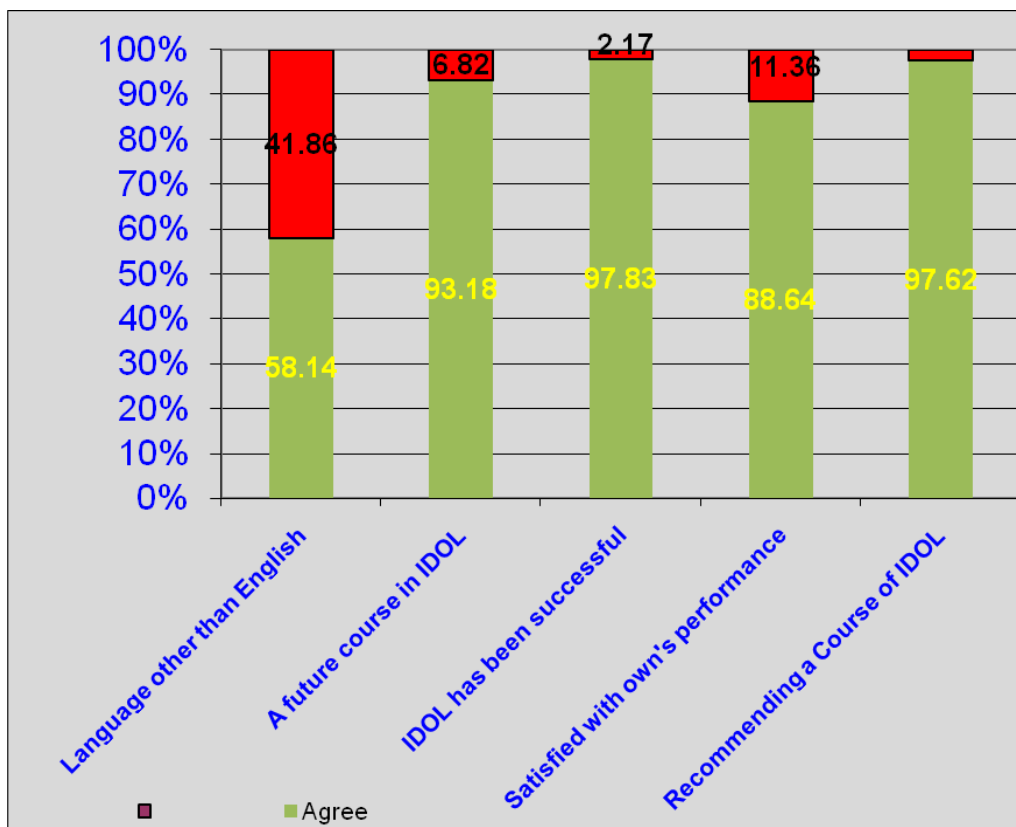
- Past students were put the questions to see how they perceived the benefits of getting enrolled into the programmes of IDOL and/or completing the same. Out of 50 students, 24 said that they got a new job. 8 respondents said that completing a programme at IDOL had helped them in moving up the ladder. Equal number of students could secure fellowship for higher studies. 4 of them could clear UGC-NET after completion of their programmes from IDOL. And 34 students felt that getting enrolled into the programmes of higher studies had helped them in improving their self-esteem in the society.

6.0 SUMMING UP

The above study indicates that ODL has made impressive growth in the state of Assam, especially in the last couple of years. The setting up of the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University has been the major fuel behind such impressive growth. The BPP programme of this University has fulfilled the much needed gap in the field of education. The dropped-out students, for whom the door to education was shut down for ever, now can enroll into the programme of this University and can earn the degree/qualification of own choice. This is the fact behind people with more than 70 years of age getting enrolled into the Academic programme of this University. And such instances are growing with the start of each academic session.

With the passage of time and emergence of newer technologies, the change has to be felt in sphere of distance education as well. As we have already mentioned, this region has been a later starter in the field of distance education. However, of late, the state has seen impressive changes in the field of distance education. People in the state have already shown their keen interest towards this mode of education. And if this trend is to continue, then the people of this state are not too far from getting access to better quality distance education supported by the advanced IT and Electronic gadgets. Some issues with regard to the utilization of library services at the study centres have come up. Such operational issues should be addressed seriously at its beginning.

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